Border studies

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BORDER STUDIES

Temporality, space, and scale

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The prediction that processes of globalization would inexorably lead to the diminished significance of international borders now seems decidedly misplaced. In fact, the most profound issues of our times are framed by the stubborn persistence of international borders in some places and their reconfiguration in others. Some of the issues relate to the positioning of the borders, while others concern the movement of people (e.g. migrants and refugees) and commodities (e.g. narcotics and pirated goods) through them. The process of global rebordering has been so rapid in the past five years that, inevitably, academic analysis is struggling to catch up.

Whereas there is often a problem in defining the limits of an academic field, there is actually substantial consensus when it comes to border(land) studies. But if the field itself is clearly bounded, it would be difficult to identify a unified approach, far less a grand theory. In fact, most boundary scholars have eschewed any such agenda (Paasi 2005: 668). Border studies straddles the core disciplines, and mediates between them, but it does not seek to replace them. Hence, it makes little sense to reinvent development economics or mobility studies in order to make sense of border flows. But because there are always at least two – and sometimes three – sides to any set of borders, they can serve as a kind of social laboratory for understanding the production of difference – whether with respect to governance structures, the economy, or cultural norms. Some of the research that is carried out in border locations is not explicitly positioned as border(land) studies. For those who regard themselves as contributing to such a defined field, much of the appeal lies in the opportunity to escape the tyranny of the disciplines and the confines of area studies. It also lies in

finding common ground with researchers who have quite different regional specialisms.

Because international boundaries tend to throw up cognate phenomena, they lend themselves to larger comparisons. For example, comparing migratory flows or small-scale trade across the United States (US)–Mexico and South Africa–Lesotho borders can be extremely enlightening (Coplan 2009), even if logistical difficulties mean that there are relatively few comparisons of this kind. But a sensitivity to the benefits of comparison is hardwired into border studies scholarship.

In order to provide a rounded account of the varied approaches to the study of borders across the world, it is important to take into account the different *dimensions* in which research is conducted as well as the *themes* that are more or less evenly distributed across them. Here, I will offer a broad overview, while drawing on some specific examples. Many of these are African, partly for the reason that this happens to be my own area of specialism, but also because this has been one of the undoubted growth areas in recent years. However, I will also have recourse to the findings of scholars working on Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

Viewing borders three-dimensionally

Border scholars grapple with very different bodies of material, which is in part a function of disparate disciplinary starting points. An area that used to be the preserve of geographers, historians, and international lawyers is now shared with political scientists, anthropologists, sociolinguists, and students of cultural studies. In addition, a field that used to be dominated by studies of the US–Mexico border and Europe has become much more variegated as insights distilled from other regions of the world have gained traction. For some, the research in question might consist of burrowing through administrative and legal archives in national or regional capitals, or engaging with policy-makers in centres of decision-making such as Brussels and Washington; for others, it is made up of a fine-grained analysis of dynamics in notionally remote fieldwork sites.

When sources converge and corroborate each other, the researcher is lucky indeed. However, it is more commonly the case that materials reach the researcher in very different registers, highlight different phenomena, and are sometimes flatly

contradictory. The dimension(s) that the researcher chooses to emphasize inevitably involve choices, and these in turn have a bearing on the shape of the data that are collected.

However, one advantage that border scholars can exploit is that they are able to mine perspectives from either side of the line. Archives tend to offer a dual perspective on the same set of issues, but this is no less true of oral informants who interpret reality in the light of circumstances on their own side of a given boundary line. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on three dimensions and the disciplines to which they are generally related.

Temporality

As political geographers have repeatedly reminded us, the notion that there are natural boundaries that manifest themselves in the contours of state borders is deeply problematic. Borders are the work of human decisions rather than Mother Nature, and to that extent are the product both of grand design and messy compromise. For historians, the meaningful questions are why borders have emerged in particular places, according to which logics, and with what consequences.

In Europe, boundary-making and state formation have generally been treated as closely related historical processes, in which contested frontier zones have sedimented as international boundaries – as in the case, for example, of France and Spain in the Pyrenees (Sahlins 1989). Europe also provides striking examples of the manner in which warfare – and even more often peace-making – has led to the abrupt repositioning of established borders, as happened in Europe and Africa after both world wars. These realities should lead one to be sceptical of the notion that borders emerged organically in the Old World context, whereas in the colonies they were externally driven.

Although some colonial borders were the consequence of international agreements made in distant European capitals, they also tended to slip into the grooves created by pre-colonial frontier zones (Nugent 2019 [forthcoming]). Although Africa has commonly been regarded as the continent afflicted by the most ‘artificial boundaries’, there is now an accumulating body of research that indicates that there was no colonial ‘big bang’ moment and that pre-existing spatial logics exercised a decisive influence (Nugent 2019 [forthcoming]; McGregor 2009).

The question of temporality is no less important for understanding the reconfiguration of borders after 1945. The implosion of European empires, and the closely associated outbreak of the Cold War, led to the emergence of new and often rather hard borders in Asia: most notably between North and South Korea and between India and Pakistan. In Europe itself, the disastrous record of conflict in the twentieth century was part of what motivated the push toward continental integration, in which the erasure of divisive borders and the ending of zero-sum politics was an explicit objective. With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the borders of Eastern and Central Europe were reconfigured in a manner that turned back the clock. Equally, the implosion of post-1919 borders in the Middle East is a further indication that, nearly a century later, history refuses to lie down.

Space

The study of international borders is very obviously about the making and remaking of space. The often imperfect relationship between cartographic representation and the realities on the ground has been of particular interest to historical geographers. Whether contemporary satellite imagery is any more conducive to establishing objective truths is a moot point because they are partial representations in their own right.

The demarcation of an international border necessarily creates its own dynamic because it creates sites where one regime of governance notionally ends and another begins. Whereas border/boundary studies concerns that which takes place at the line of separation, borderland studies is concerned with what unfolds in zones of engagement located on either side of a given line. These can evidently extend well beyond the physical border.

On the basis that borders are a state effect, there has been a growing tendency, especially among anthropologists, to focus upon ‘bordering’ processes located further still from the borderline. This would include international airports, seaports, and remote locations identified as migrant/refugee processing centres. Islands present their own unique challenges in that the entire coastline typically represents a physical border – albeit one that does not need to be physically demarcated.

Scale

Since the 1990s, there has been a movement within critical geography to question a tidy conception of the world as a series of nested Russian dolls, often expressed as the international, the national, the regional, and the local. A vast literature on 'assemblages' seeks to understand how, at a given moment, norms with very different scalar origins may come into contact (Allen and Cochrane 2010).

If the scales are really so interwoven, some scholars have raised the question of whether it is meaningful to think in terms of scales at all. However, this risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater given that bureaucracies, for example, are evidently arranged in a scalar fashion. The alternative is to take scales as a starting point and then to explore the manner in which they play off each other – as Brenner (2004) has proposed in relation to urban policy in Europe.

However, it is important to add that the scales relating to governance do not necessarily map onto those that are associated with, for instance, trade or religion. Coming from a rather different angle, a recent trend in anthropological research has tended to treat the lowest scales as constitutive of administrative practice. The idea is that what happens on the ground, in everyday interactions, is every bit as decisive as decision-making conducted at a national or international level (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). This is an insight that need not stop with officials, because what any border means is bound up with daily practices of moving through border spaces. Whether crossings are mundane or unusual, relaxed or fraught, has a crucial bearing on the manner in which the lines of division are internalized by border populations themselves.

Themes

International organization, regional integration, and cross-border cooperation

After 1945, there was a proliferation of international organizations pushing for the introduction of common norms and standards governing the global community. Some of these have had a very direct bearing on borders as sites of governance: the most obvious examples are the World Customs Organization (WCO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In addition, states have come to their own bilateral and multilateral agreements designed to facilitate the management of border flows. The North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), which binds Canada, the United States,

and Mexico, is perhaps the best-known example of a limited attempt to facilitate trade across state borders. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967, was intended to promote interstate cooperation across a wider front. The various regional economic communities (RECs) that have proliferated in Africa have followed a similar template, although this has included the right of military intervention.

The European Union (EU), by contrast with NAFTA, has been far more ambitious in pushing for integration across the board, including the introduction of a common currency and the shared Schengen immigration regime (albeit with some country opt-outs). In Africa, hybrid forms have emerged: while some RECs like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have actively promoted freedom of movement and progress toward a common currency, others have focused more on trade harmonization. The African Union (AU) itself envisages continental integration somewhat along the lines of the EU model. The relationship between the RECs and the AU is not always an easy one because of the sometimes competing priorities. The picture is further complicated by virtue of the fact that a number of the RECs have overlapping memberships.

The question of who has the right to initiate cooperation across state borders is a delicate one. In Europe, much of the impetus has come from below, with the often grudging acceptance of member states, as associations of border regions and metropolitan areas have secured EU funding to support their own agendas – a classic instance of assemblages at work. Meanwhile, in Africa, there are very few cross-border initiatives from below that are officially sanctioned, precisely because governments have been so jealous of their sovereignty. Paradoxically, the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) has made border demarcation its priority, whereas RECs have shown greater interest in promoting practical forms of cooperation. But the latter has been based on the expectation that states should take the lead, bringing in border populations only as and when deemed necessary.

Be that as it may, anthropological research has shed light on what is sometimes described as cooperation from below. The focus here is on the ways in which border populations have cut their own deals and established their own mechanisms for managing the resources arising from the existence of the border. This has included

dealing with cross-border crime such as cattle rustling, taxing trade, regulating transport, and controlling access to land. A less state-centric approach reveals a more complex set of cross-border engagements than might at first meet the eye.

The environmental consequences of boundary-making have created some incentives for cross-border cooperation at the interstate level. Because so many international boundaries follow watercourses, water management is inherently contentious – and especially so in areas of unstable rainfall. The virtual drying up of the Rio Grande (US–Mexico border) and of the River Jordan (Israel–Jordan border), partly by virtue of the diversion of water flows, provides a salutary reminder of what can happen when states compete. Cooperation in the management of shared water resources has featured prominently, for example, in West Africa: such as in the shape of the Senegal River Basin Development Organization (Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du fleuve Sénégal, OMVS) and the Gambia River Basin Development Organization (Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du fleuve Gambie, OMVG). Waste management has also provided some of the impetus for neighbouring cities on the US–Mexico border to work together even when the national governments have not seen eye to eye. In Southern Africa, a recent development has been the proliferation of transfrontier parks in which the objective is to reconcile the expansion of cross-border tourism with more effective conservation.

A body of literature on ‘the everyday state’ or ‘states at work’ focuses on how officials working within customs, immigration, and other state agencies interpret directives and fashion their own norms at the border. The mismatch between the international agreements on the freedom of movement of people and goods and the realities on the ground can often be very stark indeed.

In West and East Africa, coalitions of interested parties that campaign for more open borders have compiled detailed data on border delays, the payment of bribes, and the number of legal and illegal checkpoints per kilometre, both at the border and along the main transport corridors. Their findings underline the need for borders research to take the lower scales seriously when considering the practical realities of border governance.

Agreements signed in Brussels and Abuja might signal a desire by policy-makers to render border management less intrusive, but these count for little unless they are actually given practical effect at the border. Where state officials feel that they are left out, or that they are located at the sharp end of governance reforms, cross-border cooperation is likely to stall.

Security

Security is an issue that has become one of the most important foci of borders research over the past decade, reflecting the ways in which governments across the world have responded to an accumulation of perceived threats. First of all, wealthier states have asserted the need to exert tighter control over what passes through their borders because of the potentially harmful consequences thereof. The key perceived threats are narcotics and weapons. The US–Mexico border has become one of the battlegrounds between rival drug cartels and the state agencies operating on either side of the border (Payan 2006). Over the past decade, much of the Colombian drug trade destined for Europe has been rerouted through West Africa. But as pressure upon Guinea-Bissau has intensified and border enforcement in Nigeria has become more effective, the trade has shifted to The Gambia and Ghana, respectively.

Increasingly, the imagined threat to security includes people on the principle that migrants and refugees threaten the lifestyles of the wealthier countries – for example by placing pressure on overstretched health services or increasingly on the suspicion that they might harbour terrorist intentions. This has provided part of the rationale for Israel's attempts to create an almost impermeable border with the Palestinian settlements. It has also been the justification for President Donald Trump's attempts to bar entry to the US from targeted Muslim countries.

Along the US–Mexico and the Spain–Morocco borders, fences and sophisticated surveillance equipment have been used to exclude access. Fences and walls are blunt instruments, and migrants have tended to find their way both around and under them. Governments have therefore invested heavily in new technologies of surveillance. The EU has also engaged in a strategy of displacement by pushing the frontier of control well beyond its own physical borders – as the role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) in Africa illustrates.

In Africa itself, there is an unresolved tension between a desire to facilitate freedom of movement and to exercise better surveillance in order to forestall terrorist attacks by organizations like Al-Shabaab. In Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, military insurgencies have found a fertile breeding ground in the borderlands where the control of the central authority is often weak. The manner in which the Islamic State was able to gain control of large swathes of Syria and Iraq has provided an inspiration for movements such as Boko Haram on the border between Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad. A growth industry within political science and anthropology alike is the study of conflict dynamics in border zones. A more specialist concern within border studies concerns the technologies of border surveillance, which ranges from the routine use of biometric data at the border to the use of drones.

Borders and self-determination

There has been a resurgence of secessionist movements, stretching from Scotland and Catalonia in Europe, to western Zambia and coastal Kenya in Africa. Although many of these movements are committed to peaceful means, some defend the right to resort to arms as a last resort. In Africa, the particular manner in which South Sudan achieved its independence – that is, through a referendum won through the blood of thousands – seems to impart a clear lesson that sound arguments alone count for little.

International legal experts and national governments debate the basis on which any group of people can claim a legitimate right to self-determination. In Europe, for example, the Spanish authorities insist that there is no constitutional basis for permitting a referendum in Catalonia. Meanwhile, the insistence of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on the intangibility of inherited colonial boundaries in a couple of resolutions in 1963/64 is widely considered to have blocked the redrawing of the map of Africa after independence.

But secessionist movements learn from each other and exploit precedents that will advance their cause. South Sudan has created a precedent in Africa in the manner that Scotland might well have done in Europe. Needless to say, the creation of breakaway states inevitably means the introduction of new sets of borders and associated controls.

Border disputes

Although many of the world's borders are not considered contentious, there are some that are hotly disputed between states: such as Kashmir between Pakistan and India, or Badme between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In some of these cases, there have been violent conflicts at the border, followed by periods of relative peace when the border typically becomes a relatively hard one. An extreme case is the border between North and South Korea, which appears to have ossified.

For anthropologists, the interest lies in the institutionalization of abnormality, whereas political scientists tend to be more interested in the reasons why disputes lie dormant for long periods of time before flaring up. Much of the answer lies in the manner in which alliances are made and unravel within the borderlands. In other cases, such as the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over Bakassi, or between Mali and Burkina Faso, the cases have been decided by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The discovery of oil across much of Africa over the past decade has led to a proliferation of new disputes, which is likely to increase the load of the ICJ in the years ahead.

(Im)mobilities

There is a formidably large body of literature concerned with the passage of migrants and refugees across international borders. The attempt by governments to draw a sharp distinction between these two categories has largely broken down at the external borders of the EU, where the flows of large masses of people on the move – escaping violent conflict, avoiding political repression, or simply seeking a better life – have merged into one another. The desire of EU member states to prevent the influx has led to the unprecedented decision by member states to erect border walls, the most controversial instance being the decision of the Hungarian authorities to construct a 175-kilometre fence along the border with Serbia.

Britain's vote to (Br)exit the EU in 2016 was driven in part by a popular belief that the country would be better placed to defend its borders against a migrant influx if it was located outside Europe – although this presumes that the French authorities would be inclined to cooperate from their side of the Channel. Scholarship in the future will no doubt be forced to consider whether the migrant crisis has served to unravel the pan-European project.

In a world that is more unequal than ever, borders have been used to build better synergies on the inside and more rigid controls at the margins. This has been especially true of the US and the EU. Finding a way through the cordon has created a premium associated with human trafficking in all of the regions where hard borders represent an attempt to perpetuate marked inequalities.

The border crossing often comes at an enormous human cost – as is exemplified by the thousands of deaths of Africans seeking to cross the Mediterranean each year. Although the borders between the US and Mexico, and between the EU and its neighbours, have attracted the greatest attention, a substantial body of work points to the existence of flows of people within the developing world. South Africa, for example, has been a focus for millions of migrants drawn from across the continent – even as it has ended the systematic recruitment of labour for the gold mines of the Witwatersrand from countries such as Lesotho.

Historically, borders have been operationalized as *cordons sanitaires* to prevent the transmission of human and animal diseases. Restrictions on the movement of cattle across the colonial border between Kenya and Uganda, for example, were designed to prevent the spread of sleeping sickness. More recently, the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea has led to the closure of land borders in West Africa and to more stringent surveillance at ports of entry across the world.

Most countries have also adopted strict controls on the movement of meat products and plant materials across international borders. In a country such as Australia, this particular aspect of border policing is taken extremely seriously.

Trade and transportation

The question of scale assumes a particular significance in relation to issues of trade. Signatories to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the WCO are formally committed to removing discriminatory tariffs and applying a single set of customs values. In addition, economic communities generally seek to remove internal tariff barriers in order to promote trade between signatories.

These conventions are generally intended to cater to the needs of large economic players, and take little account of the dynamics of small-scale trade. Across Africa, these initiatives have been pursued in tandem with ambitious infrastructural

investments in port facilities, roads, and one-stop border posts. There are also active plans for the creation of integrated border management systems that will enable customs and immigration authorities in neighbouring countries to share information.

But across much of the world, borders are also the locations where small-scale trade accounts for substantial proportions of the overall flow – much of it in the shape of contraband. In Africa, official statistics on regional trade have consistently underestimated the total volume of regional trade. The gendered nature of this trade has a particular bearing on the relationship between trade and livelihoods.

Urbanism

One of the many effects of boundaries across the world is the flourishing of urban settlements that feed off border dynamics. The twin towns of the US–Mexico border, in which the larger sibling is usually found on the Mexican side of the line, is well-documented. Trade and the possibility of migration are what attract people to the Mexican 'trampoline towns'.

In Africa, a disproportionate number of capital cities are located either on, or close to, an international border. The cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, which are home to some 11 million people, provide the world's only case where capitals face each other across a border.

Although border towns have generally not grown faster than the national average, hubs within regional trading networks have often experienced the most prolific expansion of all (Soi and Nugent 2017). In such urban locations, the livelihoods of large numbers of people are bound up with the dynamics of cross-border trade.

In the EU, some of the most important showcases for cross-border cooperation have involved the formal twinning of border towns. Even where formal arrangements do not exist, it has become common practice for people to work in one city (e.g. Geneva) and live in another – often taking advantage of national differences in pay scales and national/municipal taxation.

Border cultures

Whereas much of the social science literature is concerned with processes of regulation, there is a substantial anthropological corpus that grapples with two other questions: namely the difference the existence of a border makes to the everyday lives

of ‘borderlanders’, and how far a border culture itself could be said to emerge within these exceptional spaces.

The vast literature on the US–Mexico border has explored the complex relationship between Mexican populations on two sides of the line, in which commonality and difference are simultaneously produced. An emergent body of work on African borderlands is coming to comparable conclusions about the double-edged effects that borders create.

The debate about the conditions under which distinct border cultures arise has yet to produce a clear-cut set of answers. However, there is an emergent strand on cross-border festivals that points to the ways in which actors seek to mediate the differences that national processes have tended to instil, including language, food and drink, music, literature, and dress. The difficulty for actors has resided in the desire to reconcile the elements that are held in common with an acceptance of the reality that the influences emanating from the national centres have created genuine differences.

On the interface between francophone and anglophone states in West Africa, something as simple as bread – baguettes versus sweetened bread – point to the manner in which borders serve to engender difference. In the everyday, researchers can point to some of the ways in which macro- and micro-level processes are interwoven.

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